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Nigeria: at least one dead as tensions increase in Ogoniland

Violence may be returning to Ogoniland, southeast Nigeria, Amnesty International said today after receiving reports that police shot dead at least one person -- possibly more -- and burned down homes. More police have been sent into the area and access to journalists barred.

According to the Rivers State authorities in Port Harcourt, the state capital, police went to the village of K-Dere, Gokana local government area, in the early hours of 11 April to quell inter-communal unrest between the inhabitants and those of a neighbouring village. The authorities have confirmed that one resident was killed by police, while police sources have also been quoted as reporting that five other people were killed. Eight police officers were seized for a period and seriously injured.

Reports from a local community and human rights organization, however, appear to indicate that the police raid was an unprovoked attack on K-Dere because its residents had opposed a road-building project by a company contracted to the Shell oil company.

According to the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), the community organization formerly headed by the executed writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, police started arresting people suspected of opposition to the road project in the early hours of 11 April and shot dead Barinaadua Jungle Gbaraka, aged 18, when he tried to escape. Nine officers were reportedly then beaten by local youths. Later in the day dozens of armed police officers returned to the village, MOSOP said, killed at least five and possibly more people and burned down homes. Those killed or injured were reportedly taken away by the police. At least seven people are known to have been arrested and scores of inhabitants fled the area.

“Individuals appear to have been specifically targeted,” Amnesty International said. “Reports indicate that the police were accompanied by a senior local government official and associates who identified individuals to target and homes to destroy.”

Among the homes razed was that of Ledum Mitee, lawyer and current leader of MOSOP, and other community leaders, including two traditional rulers. Ledum Mitee was one of six defendants acquitted of murder charges after the political trials of MOSOP supporters which resulted in the conviction and execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni companions in 1995. The State Police Commissioner told journalists that Ledum Mitee would be arrested as a suspect, and he has been questioned at police headquarters since this morning.

MOSOP has specifically denied that there was any unrest in the area prior to the police raid on K-Dere, and has accused the police of helping to force through the road project on behalf of those it would benefit.

Amnesty International urges the Nigerian authorities to ensure that attacks on the village of K-Dere are halted immediately and that residents who have been arrested, some of whom are reported to have been wounded, are safeguarded from ill-treatment in detention and provided with any necessary medical treatment. The organization is concerned at a report that one of those arrested, Pastor Deebari Zortee of the Apostolic Church, was beaten. The detainees should be released if they are not to be promptly charged and tried.

“Nigerian governments have had a long record of inaction after such incidents which should not continue,” Amnesty International said. “As a high priority the new government should initiate a thorough and impartial investigation to establish who has been killed or injured, and to bring those responsible for unlawful acts to justice. Otherwise it will appear that there is no more accountability under a civilian government than under a military one.”

In the mid-1990s the security forces were reported to have committed extrajudicial executions and to have instigated inter-communal violence in Ogoniland. Although the new civilian government which came to power in May 1999 set up a human rights investigation panel to look into human rights violations between 1966 and May 1999, killings by the security forces in recent months do not appear to have come under scrutiny.

The results of an internal inquiry ordered into killings by the military in September 1999 in Yenagoa, capital of neighbouring Bayelsa State, have not been made public. And further killings and the razing of the town of Odi near Yenagoa by the military in November 1999, apparently in reprisal for the murder of 12 police officers, have also not resulted in action being taken against those responsible although a Senate committee of inquiry concluded that excessive force had been used.

In recent weeks, there had been controversy over the road-building project. Six youths from the village of K-Dere in the Gokana local government area were arrested on 23 March and detained without charge for several days after protests against it.

“It is clear that pressure from some local authorities to invite Shell involvement in a development project in the oil-rich Gokana local government area has aroused tensions between local residents and those employed on or profiting from the project,” said Amnesty International.
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